

## *Sound and fury greet Bannon at debate*

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### **Body**

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In a cramped \$200 seat, listening to two white middle-aged men, big-brained.

Thinking: This would have been a whole lot more fun as a tabloid talk show moderated by Jerry Springer.

Would someone please throw a chair? Pull some hair? Accuse Steve Bannon or David Frum of being the two-timing deadbeat father of their baby-mama's spawn?

But no. This is the Munk Debates on a Friday evening in Toronto, at staid Roy Thomson Hall, highbrow central. I hear a symphony ...

In one corner: Mr. Neo Con, when that breed was in the political ascendancy. Writer of George W. Bush speeches and coiner, sorta, of "the Axis of Evil," n#233;e "the Axis of Hatred," until an edit, which is kind of like taking credit for "Snap! Pop!" before someone else inserted the "Crackle!" in between.

In the other corner, looking like an unmade bed, is the man who concocted President Donald Trump from a petri dish of odium, bile and narcissism. Campaign alchemist-in-chief, lord of the dark side, accelerant of dystopian politics at home and abroad, freelance fomenter now. Have sludge, will travel. Dumped by the White House when the monster had no further need of the master. Evacuated - "stepped down" - as executive chairman of alt-right Breitbart News, babble-hub for fervent nativism and white supremacist views.

It took 30 seconds into Bannon's opening remarks for a shriek to disrupt the proceedings and for an anti-Bannon banner to unfurl from the balcony, to a round of boos.

Frum is conservative establishment - for them what likes that kind of thing. Bannon is rabid Anti-Establishment, the outlier who became an insider before Trump punted him.

Frum is a senior editor at The Atlantic. Bannon is - what? - an ideological mercenary, on a far-right mission to radicalize Europe, among his other time-fillers. Also available, he's said, to boost the left if strategic expertise is sought. A fox among the fowl. Which might not be such a dumb idea because Big Left has lost its focus, rushing off in all hair-pulling directions.

As an intellectual, Frum would probably brighten anybody's dinner party, although last night's rant-a-thon was clearly not triggered by him, who was almost drive-by smeared as an Iraq invasion warmonger.

Bannon is all the time getting invited and disinvited from various tall forehead events, depending on how much blow-black the hosts can withstand.

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Just as the rent-a-demo legions lost their nut when it was announced that Bannon and Frum would be featured in this year's Munk Debates. The pro and con of: Be it resolved, the future of western politics is populist, not liberal. A legitimate issue as populism surges from Italy to Brazil, even to the backwater of Ontario.

A platform for hate-mongers! Normalizing the fringe abnormal! Ban Bannon! Tone-deaf argy-bargy, rendered even more objectionable not a week after an anti-Semitic shooter invaded a Pittsburgh synagogue and murdered 11 Jewish worshippers. As they do, down there, slaughter in gun rampages, I mean. That's their not-so-new normal.

It's almost funny, though, mounting a yak-yak challenge between a buttoned-down right winger and a circling Pluto right winger, each allegedly fighting for the soul of the, well ... right wing. (Which, as anybody can tell you, has no soul.) Might as well shove Roseanne Barr up there crossing barbs with Kanye West. Neither is a bell-ringer for liberalism.

The GOP has essentially been hijacked by its rump fringe, coalescing around a shambolic megalomaniac. Hence scarcely a peep from ranking Republicans about Muslim bans and separating asylum-seeking parents from their children and calling out the army to stonewall a migrant caravan when it reaches the U.S.-Mexico border.

Two men on a stage. While, outside, all the street was a stage for the proponents of shut 'em up. Inciteful rather than insightful.

Their resolution, not up for debate: Dangerous ideas don't belong in the public square, or even a ticketed forum. As if a couple of guys blowing palaver threaten the very fabric of democracy. Pitchfork, please.

Let us list the naysayers by affiliation, alphabetically, as cited in the media advisory: ALBA Movement Canada, Anakbayan Toronto, Anarchist Network of Toronto, Canadian Council of Muslim Women, Canadian Federation of Students (Ontario), Colombian Action Solidarity Alliance, Common Frontiers, CUPE 3902 Flying Squad, CUPE 3903, CUPE Toronto District Council, East End United Regional Ministry, Fightback, Great Lakes Antifa, If Not Now, Independent Jewish Voices, International Socialists, INAF: Intersectional Anti-Fascists, LAEN Latinx, Latin American Solidarity Network, Mining Injustice Solidarity Network, No More Silence, No One is Illegal, Ontario Coalition Against Poverty, OPIRG Toronto, Physics Graduate Society of University of Toronto, PODER Afro y Abya Yala Fuerza Feminista, RadTo, Rhythms of Resistance, Solidarity Against Fascism Everywhere, Sisterhood of Salaam Shalom-Toronto, The Council of Canadians, Toronto New Socialists, Toronto IWW General Defence Committee Local 28, Toronto Venezuela Solidarity Committee, Toronto Peoples Assembly on Climate Justice, Urban Alliance on Race Relations, United Jews People's Order, Women's Coordinating Committee for a Free Wallmapu, York Campus Anti Fascist Network.

What, no PETA? What's a protest jamboree without critter-huggers?

Like Trump, I'm no good at estimating crowds. But at the pre-event scene some protestersters hid their faces behind bandanas - never a good sign - and several aggressively heckled ticket-holders in the lineup: SHAMEONYOUSHAMEONYOUSHAMEONYOU.

The assembled edged loudly down Simcoe Street, on the eastern flank of the hall, roused by rumours that four demonstrators had already been arrested and chant-hollering: WHOSE STREET! OUR STREET!

Truly, I admire their certitude. It must be such a comfort to be so righteous, slamming strangers as Nazis and fascists I might say reactionary, but that would be stealing their script.

Bannon is a carpetbagger, of course, doubtless thrilled by his notoriety. At least that reinforces his vanity of relevance. As guest speaker at a mid-terms rally in Topeka a couple of days ago, he attracted a crowd of "about 25." The repent-ye Bible-thumper at Yonge and Dundas draws a larger audience. But maybe it's different when charging 200 clams per ducat. Then it's a sold-out affair and let's meet for cocktails beforehand.

I am agnostic on to-Bannon-or-not-to-Bannon. I take no position. Which would surely get me bounced from the columnists' union, having nary an opinion with which to bludgeon readers.

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A made-up mind is a bitch of a thing to change anyway. Which is why, I suppose, there's no point in pitching Bannon against, say, Naomi Klein. An echo chamber built for two. (Actually, whatever happened to Naomi Klein?)

Some day soon: Whatever happened to Steve Bannon?

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## Classification

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